

As jobs are privatized, paraprofessionals at Trenton public schools worried that they'll be next

The Times By Matt Fair
on November 26, 2011 at 7:12 AM

http://www.nj.com/mercer/index.ssf/2011/11/as_jobs_are_privatized_parapro.html

TRENTON — Paraprofessionals in Trenton public schools say that private, non-union staffers — hired this year to work with the district's special-needs students — are gunning for their jobs, union officials told the school board this week.



Photo/ David Gard
Aerials of Mercer Co. Trenton Central High School,
looking southeast. Wednesday, April 16, 2008.

Yet even as workers with Mission One, the Cherry Hill-based educational staffing company hired by the district this year, allegedly have said they intend to take over all paraprofessional services next year, union officials including Betty Glenn say that the Mission One employees have fallen far short of providing the services that the district's staff provides.

“Babysitters, I call them,” said Glenn, head of the Trenton Paraprofessionals Association. “High-paid babysitters.”

The school district last year laid off 22 paraprofessionals — aides who work closely with students and provide in-class support to teachers — in a move that officials said would save about \$600,000. The paraprofessionals specifically helped students with developmental disabilities or medical problems — known as 504s — or other students who required one-on-one support and constant attention due to other behavioral issues.

Since then, the district has offered those paraprofessionals other jobs while bringing in nearly 20 private workers through Mission One to work with the special needs students, Glenn said.

But while Glenn said that the paraprofessionals traditionally helped the medically and behaviorally challenged students with class work, Mission One's staffers have not gotten involved with that. Instead, she said, the workers have been observed reading magazines in class, texting on their cell phones, or even leaving the building to take cigarette breaks.

The lack of attention to their students, Glenn said, has resulted in chaos in some schools as students with behavioral issues have gone unchecked.

“The one-on-ones are running all over the building. No one has control,” Glenn said.

She cited one incident during a fire drill when one of the private workers ran from the building without escorting the student the worker was assigned to help.

“I don’t think they were prepared when they brought this group in to know the details of all the things the paraprofessionals did when they worked with these one-on-ones and 504s,” she said.

Kevin Bush, president of Mission One, said he hadn’t gotten word of any complaints about the workers from any school principals or district officials.

“We take those actions very seriously and if those had been reported to us by principals or building managers we would’ve handled that very quickly,” he said.

“Bluntly, someone who does that would not be an employee of our organization. Our hiring practices and employee management would not allow for those sorts of things to happen.”

Bush also said it is against state code for paraprofessionals to get involved in classroom instruction.

“It’s very clear that paraprofessionals are not to provide lesson plans or instruct or teach classes. They’re there to assist the child and the teacher,” he said. “They do not hold a teaching certificate.”

Despite the Mission One workers’ alleged shortcomings, Glenn said, they’ve still boasted that they hope to take over all paraprofessional services in the coming years.

“They came in saying that their goal is to take all of the paraprofessionals’ jobs. There is so much tension in the buildings now it is unbelievable,” she said.

Bush denied that charge, adding that the company was not involved in any talks about expanding the scope of their contract with the district.

The Mission One workers do not belong to a union. The district hired them this year at a cost not to exceed \$500,000.

“Our contract with Trenton is pretty simple,” Bush said. “Our goal is not to disband or break up the union. Trenton had a need. They had 18 or 19 positions unfilled at the beginning of the year to work with these children. For the union, I’m sure it’s upsetting to them because at the end of the day the district is unable to fill positions and they feel that work is being taken from them.”

Rather, he claimed that union members were provoking his employees.

“Our staff has been harassed on a daily basis by the collective bargaining unit, and our staff has been instructed to turn a blind eye,” he said. “Our workers are told not to respond or antagonize any individuals in the district.”

Mission One provides similar services in Asbury Park, Camden, Northern Burlington Regional School District, and Piscataway.